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## COLOR DECORATION.\*

THAT the proportions of any interior may be very largely affected by the scheme of decoration is, of course, very well known to you, as are also, no doubt, a few of the broader rules bearing on this axiom. It may also not have escaped your observation that they are constantly disregarded, even by architects, when they dabble in colors, who seem too often to be carried away by a love of some particular arrangement of wall surface; sometimes a wide frieze, at others a high dado being indispensable to their content, whatever the height, or size, or style of the room. Now, I shall ask you to make it your fixed rule to begin by considering the size, proportion, and other conditions of your room, and then to determine whether it is desirable to express or add to its apparent height, or its apparent width and size. You can, if necessary, considerably increase either, but not both. It will generally be found that, speaking broadly, what you add to one you take from the other. When this point has been decided, you will find it a much easier matter to deal consistently with the arrangement or division of the surfaces presented to you. Observe, I by no means insist that a room must be made to look higher, but I do insist that you should know whether you intend it to look higher or not, and that your distribution of surface decoration should not be entirely regardless of proportion.

It is a very common fallacy that to color a ceiling is to lower it. Still more often is this result expected if projecting ribs or moldings be added to divide the blank surface. Yet it may easily be shown in argument, as it is constantly exemplified in practice, that the opposite effect is quite as often produced, color being the determining agent. Let us assume the walls of a small private library, 12 feet high, to be hung with one of the embossed leather papers now in frequent use: the pattern brown and gold on perhaps a warm green ground; the bookcases below, of oak or walnut wood, with their contents, maintaining a quiet similarity of general tone. The cornice is, say, 9 inches deep. If you leave it a light tint and the ceiling plain, the room will appear quite 9 inches lower than it would were the cornice brown, like the bookcases. And if this brown is continued on to the ceiling by means of wooden ribs, the room will gain at least another 6 inches in apparent height.

The fact is, that the point at which the attention is arrested by a marked contrast is that by which the eye assesses the height; and since the moldings of the cornice project inwards to the room, even more apparent height is gained (than is marked in vertical distance) when the contrast is placed high, since advantage is taken of an apparent perspective.

On the other hand, if it be desired for other reasons to retain the wooden ribs and cornice, yet not to add to the apparent height, a corrective is readily applied in color—either in the form of a narrow frieze, of sufficiently emphatic contrast, below the cornice, or by contrasted relief of color at the same point as the cornice itself. Even a line of gilding may suffice.

In the same way the influence of a wide frieze or a dado on the proportions of a room is largely controlled by the coloring. A wide frieze may be used of the same coloring or even of the same depth of tone as the wall below, without materially affecting the apparent height; but a very small amount of contrast in tone will be sure to tell in the case of a large plane surface. Hence, if a frieze with some contrast be used where height cannot be sacrificed, it is essential to place its brightest contrasts as high up and as near the cornice as possible, lest the eye be arrested at the bottom, and the frieze itself, together with the cornice, be relegated to the ceiling. Some rooms are high enough to bear this sacrifice of wall, in which case they largely gain in apparent width and space.

There are in most rooms certain features which may be made to aid in the expression of proportion. Such are doors, windows, and chimney-breasts. In nine houses out of ten the dimensions of the door have no relation to those of the room. There are many ready methods of getting over this difficulty, such as the addition of door-head or frieze, with capping molding; or, in some cases, continuing the framing of the door so as to enclose a panel above it, to be treated distinctly from the other wall surface. Then, again, the windows may, by the arrangement and coloring of the draperies, be made to distinctly influence the proportion. And so with the chim-

ney-breast, a marked feature in most ordinary dwelling-rooms. A sense of size and importance may often be given by treating the whole breast as a part of the fireplace arrangement, or, at any rate, as a distinct feature.

After all, it is the ceiling which is in most cases the decorator's great opportunity. Where it is already divided into panels or ornamented in relief his first consideration will be how to do it most justice—to express it in the best way, and to emphasize the right points. Apart from the actual harmony of coloring, the good management of light and dark tones is of the first importance; to give point without producing patches of color, and obtain a sufficient uniformity of effect without tameness or monotony. It is astonishing how a ceiling may be lifted out of mere flatness by the judicious disposition of its leading lines. If these are rightly expressed much may be forgiven in minor defects of ornament or color. The ceilings of the great majority of our rooms are flat, owing to the exigencies of space, no less than to those of cost. Let us, therefore, consider what variety of effect is attainable with ceilings of flat construction.

In the first place, where a perfectly flat plane of plaster is presented, there are the alternatives of treating it with colors alone, or of previously subdividing it by moldings or relief ornament. The latter treatment is the one which obviously recommends itself where there is not too close a limit of cost, and especially if the area of ceiling be large. It is indeed most difficult to treat satisfactorily, with color alone, a large area of plain flat ceiling, and such treatment should really be limited to ceilings of small dimensions. I will return to this point. The methods of division are numerous enough, and the decorator will be guided by several considerations in deciding on which to adopt. The amount of relief must be determined, firstly, by the height and size of the room, especially by the height, but also by the depth and richness of the coloring intended for the walls. Here, again, comes in the question of the ultimate use of the room; for a light and gay coloring is not compatible with the use of heavy moldings or deeply-recessed panels in the ceiling. This is one reason why the relief ornament of the ceiling should either be designed by the decorator or in co-operation with him. To be successful it must form a part of the color scheme. The light and shade of the relief ornament and moldings are a most important factor in any scheme of coloring.

Like the walls, a ceiling may be so divided and subdivided as to materially affect its apparent length and breadth, and upon the same general principles. This, whether with or without any relief of moldings, but preferably by their aid. It has already been explained that height is to be given by attracting attention to some feature high up in the cornice, but you may go further and place your decisive contrast in the margin of the ceiling itself. From this point you may, if the area of the ceiling be square or nearly so, either maintain a flat or horizontal effect, or you may impart to it an appearance of rising from wall to centre.

Where the intention is to maintain the effect of a horizontal ceiling the principal lines (if firmly expressed) must be distributed with even impartiality over the surface in a design consisting of a repetition of geometric forms, or of forms having the appearance of repetition, or monotonous in their degree of relief. Or, again, very marked straight lines, taken from cornice to cornice across the ceiling, will emphasize the horizontal sufficiently.

When, on the contrary, it is wished to raise your ceiling in the centre, it will be necessary to take care that your main lines are clearly marked by vigor of relief or of color contrast, and that their arrangement expresses a growth from sides to centre. Your coloring must be so adjusted as to keep, firstly, the sharpest contrasts to aid in expressing their growth; secondly, the weight of color gravitating towards the angles. In like manner the ornamentation, whether in color or relief, should be made to assist in the effect of growth towards the centre; in fact, to flow with the same motive or tendency as it should have were the ceiling actually concave.

It may be useful here to lay down an axiom in reference to molded ceilings. It is this: "For light tints of color, and with bright, gay tones, the relief of molded surface should be very moderate. Strong relief of molded surface is compatible with the use of powerful color in masses, and with dark low tones. It may, moreover, be taken as a general rule for any situation that 'strong shadows are incompatible with the use of light tints.'"

It will, as a rule, be found that where a flat ceiling has to be treated in color only, without

any aid of moldings, it is desirable to maintain white as the ground, or, at any rate, to retain a great deal of white—for without white it is difficult to indicate with sufficient clearness the main lines as distinct from those which have no more serious purpose than ornamentation—that is to say, to distinguish the lines which affect proportion from those which are a part of the detail. This rule does not apply with the same force on curved surfaces, where less artificial suggestion of form is demanded, and where, moreover, gold can be used much more freely should the circumstances admit of it.

The staircase is another important feature in every house, and since its decorative treatment often presents difficulties, it seems desirable to consider how they may best be met.

Where it is practicable—and it is so in some staircases—it is very desirable to make a broad distinction of coloring between the lower and upper stories, inserting a sort of string course at the level of, perhaps, the first floor. This at once gives breadth and stability of appearance, and helps to counteract that effect of perpetual treadmill which is so unpleasant in mounting an ordinary staircase. Where it is not possible satisfactorily to effect this marked horizontal division, it is possible, and frequently advantageous, to adopt such a design of decoration or paper hanging as admits of the repetition of horizontal lines at brief intervals. This was the one good feature of the old marbled papers in blocks, and which still leads people to assert that a staircase looks larger with a marbled paper, the sense of width being in fact due to the horizontal joints, not to the figure of the marble. Designers who have perceived this fact now produce patterns arranged on the same block system, and suitable for narrow staircases.

Where an open well-staircase exists, with stairs to the first or second floors only, and open wall above, much may be done with moderate use of color in cornice and frieze to give a value to the whole. In such cases there should certainly be a well-defined frieze or string course at the level at which the stairs cease.

The soffits of the stairs may often be advantageously panelled out with moldings, but where they are the plain soffits of stone stairs this is not very readily managed, and one must then have recourse to color. A very simple use of even colored lines will often be of considerable value. Again, much may be done to relieve the meanness and monotony of a staircase by making a sort of vestibule or separate feature of one of the principal landings; and concentrating there your richer coloring and ornamentation instead of frittering them away in dribbles over the whole.

The use of stained glass in one form or another has become so frequent for domestic purposes that it is no longer necessary to advocate it. Perhaps it is rather necessary to ask for discrimination in its use. It does not accord well with light tints of pure tones in the decoration, but with low tones, whether light or dark, and with deep rich tones of color it may usually be adjusted harmoniously. There are, of course, some restrictions connected with style which it is well to observe, because no mind trained in the history of art can altogether shake off those impressions of fitness or incongruity which are the direct result of such training.

I have in former lectures spoken at length on the use of gilding in decoration, but cannot altogether pass it by here. Properly used it is most valuable, serving, as it does, several distinct purposes. It is valuable for explaining form, for lighting up surface ornament, for separating colors, and for the mellowing effect it has on all coloring. It gives the decorator a ready means of "emphasis," serving to carry the eye to the right points and along the right lines, even in the shadowed parts of the work, or where the coloring is deep enough to make emphasis of color alone difficult. It should be borne in mind that gilding, to be successful, must be used boldly and with very defined purpose, because in some lights you will see the gilding when you cannot distinguish colors. Timid gilding, in meager lines or detached patches, is always to be avoided. It has the same sort of effect as cheap finery, and is destructive of repose. Gilding, properly used, even where very freely used, never looks tawdry or vulgar; and where you find an interior spoken of as vulgar or tawdry from over gilding, you may depend upon it that it is less the quantity of gold than its being in the wrong places which has produced the effect.

Reverting, indeed, to the question of "emphasis" in decoration, whether by gilding or otherwise, I may say that nothing is more essential to the success of any decoration, and when properly used, will very materially add to the effect.—*The Builder*.

\* A paper by Mr. John D. Crace, read before the Architectural Association, London, Eng.